Quick Mood Fixes vs.
Sustained Relational Giving—

How to Hold On to

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Feeling Happy & Being

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The Contextual Therapy (CT) perspective of being happy differs from what seems to be a popular notion of what it takes to feel happy. Key concepts of essential happiness versus transitory happiness are explored here in order to provide a better understanding of intra- and interpersonal choices promoting a state of well-being. The work of Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, the founder of CT, suggests that internal individual happiness is the phenomenon achieved through a fair and just dialogic experience—the base of all relational happiness. For example, a person can feel momentarily happy about the purchase of a new gadget—yet be profoundly unhappy in life—if meaningful dialogue and meaningful giving to another human being is missing. Contextual therapy is challenging the contemporary pursuit of elusive happiness.

The quest to understand the nature of happiness and how to achieve it has entered public awareness and psychological discussion with full force* (Gilbert, 2006). It appears that current culture eagerly promotes activities and material acquisitions as a way to create immediate excitement and joy, which may mistakenly be taken for happiness, but tends to fade as soon as the initial stimulation wanes. Contextual thinking, as originated by Boszormenyi-Nagy, calls us to examine the essence and the lasting effects of fair and meaningful giving to those who are part of our lives, in order to gain a sense of personal worth—the underpinning of all personal and lasting happiness.

The "pursuit of happiness" has been anchored in the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States as one of the "unalienable rights" of Americans. Philosophers such as J. Locke ("The Essay Concerning Human Understanding," 1690), J.J. Rousseau ("La Nouvelle Heloise," 1761), and J. S. Mill, ("On liberty," 1859) have nurtured this concept, which may have produced unintended and unforeseen results. When interpreted as an automatic birthright, achieving happiness alone becomes a deceptively simple goal, yet proves to be completely elusive. Such illusion may in fact lead to the general uneasiness and restless dissatisfaction observed in Western life. It may even have created an individualistic culture of "takers" accustomed to claim, rather than to give.

When Viktor Frankl, the renowned psychiatrist, visited America in 1970, he recommended that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be complemented by a "Statue of Responsibility" on the West Coast. John F. Kennedy, in his inaugural address in 1961, voiced a similar concern when he proclaimed, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." A life of liberty emphasizing individual rights alone creates a relational imbalance that cannot produce genuine and lasting happiness. To be complete, liberty indeed has to come with responsibility. Without responsibility, there is no meaningful liberty. Without constructive consideration of "the other" and his or her needs, such personal and disconnected freedom easily can turn into selfish, fleeting pleasures (such as gambling, excessive shopping, or substance use)—a transient mindset of happiness.

The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel ("The Phenomenology of the Mind," 1807) developed the concept that all human reality originates from the dialectic encounter with an "other." Applying this concept, contextual therapy postulates that the individual is made real only in meaningful and fair relating—giving and receiving true consideration. Martin Buber in "I and Thou" (1937) also directs our attention to the significance of this concept: the "thou" is crucial to the very existence of the "I". It is a well-known phenomenon that the individual suffers greatly when isolated from meaningful relationships. As we learned from studies of physically well-nurtured but relationally deprived children, continuous and emotionally responsive care is crucial to even basic human survival. Without it, emotional and physical death follows. Such need for meaningful relationships prevails across the lifespan and greatly determines a person's state of emotional wellness and happiness.

From ancient times, the Jewish sage Hillel (1st century BCE) brings to our awareness the significance of mutual-

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ity in relationships. He recognized the necessity of finding a balance between giving to and taking from life in this formulation: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Finding the balance between taking care of oneself, and at the same time being mindful of the needs of the "other," has remained an essential, ongoing, and urgent directive, a central issue for all humans at all stages of life.

However, current popular discussion on happiness frequently seems to center on mere superficial relief of disappointments, diffusing sadness, and even depression by doing, gaining, consuming, owning, achieving, and mastering. This approach may increase one's sense of power and status. However, it may also create dependency on material things and external validation without contributing to true self-worth and a genuine state of happiness independent of events and how one is perceived.

Equally treacherous can be the predominant focus on "thinking happy," as in altering the state of mind, rather than the state of being. As a current example, the *Wall Street Journal* (March 18, 2006), reports biological research which explored neurological signs of happiness in the anticipation of material gain (Knutson, 2006), leaving one to wonder whether happiness is increasingly conceptualized as just a mood, quick to influence and perhaps quick to fix. Indiscriminate use of antidepressants as well as recreational drugs taken for the sole purpose of changing the mood cater to the consumerist attitude of "I gotta have it," as in "a happy feeling"— without making too much of an effort to earn it. Understanding consumers' search for at least temporary happiness and their willingness to pay for it is key to any successful advertisement, appealing to the sense of entitlement, as in "You deserve it." Advertisement promises a happy state of mind when superficially connecting with an idea, group, activity or product. These findings have merit in gaining understanding of how to "mind one's mind," or how to mind somebody else's mind, for the purpose of creating temporary feelings of happiness. However, they seem reductionistic and narrow in scope, ignorant to what moral philosophy and psychology believe can generate sustainable happiness. In order to achieve a more complex understanding of all matters of happiness, it may benefit us to look within the context of relational giving.

We can think of the child of newly affluent parents who vow to give him everything they did not have, devoting their energy predominantly to "providing" materially, hoping to create happiness and to correct their own growing-up experience. Ironically, because of subsequent parental permissive non-involvement or downright emotional absence, the child may receive material benefits, but may actually suffer from emotional deprivation. She may have "everything,"

but very little which would enhance her true self-worth. Unbeknownst to all involved, the underlying emotional deprivation may easily lead to the child's pervasive sense of being owed, despite the material wealth surrounding her. The child is prone to ask for more of what the parents are known to give, in order to fill the relational vacuum of which she is not consciously aware.

Examining the parents' experience, a destructive cycle is created here for the entire family. As the parents have striven to succeed materially, surpassing their own parents and their more humble origins, they in turn feel entitled to some emotional compensation—provided by their children. The currency of the parental compensation often manifests itself in the form of expectations imposed on their children—to show gratitude, happiness and achievement as a testimony to the parents' success. However, in the process, the children may become parentified, being asked to take care of their parents' emotional needs. Despite their efforts, unhappiness is invariably created, and both children and parents feel cheated.

Here Nagy's direction may possibly lead to a better understanding of this baffling phenomenon: Over giving parents live in perplexity why their supposedly happy and satisfied offspring may instead become sullen, directionless, defiant and destructive in their ever increasing demands for more material "goodies." Parents over focused on success or material gains risk missing opportunities to engage their children in age- and developmentally-appropriate giving back—for example, asking the children to adhere to properly enforced behavioral boundaries and household rules, hindering their child's relational and intrapsychic development. To give appropriately would earn the child a sense of pride and self-worth, leading to a sense of satisfaction and genuine happiness. If the child knows no way to act responsibly and earn his entitlement to go about his life freely and constructively, acting out appears to be an alternative. Such absence of constructive entitlement creates destructive entitlement—all in the pursuit of the ever-elusive happiness. Drugs, gratuitous destructive acts, even criminal behavior can beckon with the promise of the buzz of being in touch with "real life."

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However, the creation of sustainable relational happiness can be achieved even in situations of prolonged relational dissatisfaction, as in the following case example.

Joe, age 50, presented with lifelong depression, a failed career, poor social life, and a failed marriage. His depression blocked him from performing even the most menial tasks. Medications and psychotherapy succeeded only minimally. He described himself as a victim of an abusive father who never acknowledged any merit and degraded him.

After acknowledging the client's suffering, the therapist moved to understand the father's possible wounds, and to discover the father's merit, however minimal it might have seemed. It became evident that Joe's father never recovered from the early death of his first wife. His second wife and children from this marriage never could replace or match his first true love. Although Joe's parents were deceased, the search for meaningful giving of the client to his parents began. Due to the parents' distant relationship with their children, and contrary to their religious tradition, both parents decided to simply be cremated, assuming their children's future neglect of any grave. Subsequently, their ashes were stored and ignored in the client's brother's home. The therapist suggested that Joe find ways to pay due respect to his parents and to find a dignified way to remember them.

After initial resistance, Joe decided to bury his parents' remains in an identifiable grave that he and his family members could visit in the future. A few weeks later, Joe called to report a respectful burial of the parents' remains and described his distinct and noticeable improvement, especially his new sense of freedom to fulfill long standing plans for the future. Joe experienced a

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sense of relational peace and happiness by giving care and consideration to his parents, earning a new sense of self-worth and the freedom to get on with life. Relocation and obtaining a new job finally were within reach.

This case is an illustration of correcting long-standing unhappiness due to intergenerational unfairness, which had been unresponsive to antidepressant medication and non-relational therapy interventions, by finding a simple way to right the wrong. When Joe became able to acknowledge what his father did give, he in turn became free and able to give to his father. Freeing himself from a vague debt enabled Joe to walk forward, feeling new energy and finding himself in a profound state of happiness that remained unaltered by external challenges of daily living. Joe's new state of happiness predictably affected his interactions with his own children, who had suffered from his previous overall instability. No longer focused on what went wrong in his life, Joe became a more predictable father, giving appropriately to his children and investing appropriate energy in his life.

In an informal survey during a seminar for helping professionals, the authors asked what made the participants happy. Most of the answers relayed that lasting happiness was experienced when self-worth was achieved through appropriate giving according to the need of an "other." Participants' examples of relational giving included emotionally, physically, and materially assisting a family member, friend or neighbor, or volunteering in a hospice setting and other places of need.

These answers, as well as previously discussed examples, support the notion that giving in order to bestow benefit to others returns benefit to the giver, generating a state of true happiness. The contextual understanding of happiness emphasizes the relational nature of lasting happiness. It is independent of short-term, opportunistic, external, or predominantly self-indulgent reinforcers, and comes from a deep understanding of what is fair and just in responding to the need of an "other," while being mindful of one's own needs. Even in seemingly dysfunctional situations where unhappiness prevails, the destructive cycle can be broken with a genuine response to another's need. ❍

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